

# Fifty Years of Comprehensive Music Education

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practitioner and a teacher of performing ensembles, among other responsibilities I believe that a \_\_\_\_\_ approach to music education is critical to effective teaching and learning. But exactly what does comprehensive music education entail? Comprehensive music education is a multi-faceted way of approaching the teaching and learning of music.

The word \_\_\_\_\_, according to my dictionary, is defined as “including or comprehending much; large in scope or content; capable of understanding or perceiving easily or well” (Morris, 1969). At the most basic level, the idea of comprehensive music education is quite straightforward and would almost seem to be common sense. Certainly, we wish for our teaching to “include or comprehend much and to be large in scope or content,” and don’t we wish to make our students “capable of understanding or perceiving easily or well”? Wouldn’t this be common sense? Unfortunately, as Voltaire observed, common sense is not so common (\_\_\_\_\_, 1999). As music educators, it is all too easy to be caught up in the superficial trappings of teaching music (particularly psyandimusic (particularent,(e)u4 (nt)-2 (JTJ ET Q q )-2 ( 0 scn7( of)3 ( t)-2 (e)4 (a)4 (c)4

These four principles are the crux of comprehensive music education, as I understand it. The remainder of this paper will expand on these basic ideas and will focus on three areas: I will describe a few personal examples of comprehensive and non-comprehensive music education that I experienced as a music student and teacher. Then, I will review some pivotal events in the history of comprehensive music education, particularly since 1957. Finally, I will describe some current issues related to comprehensive music education, and attempt to draw some conclusions.

### **Triumphs and Tragedies of a Music Student and Teacher**

I was born in 1950, and was a student in the public schools of the U.S. in the 1950s and 1960s. We lived in three different states, as my father's work took him to different parts of the country. I began my teaching career in the early 1970s. Three examples from my personal experiences will help to illustrate the differences between comprehensive and non-comprehensive music education.

My first example is an elementary school orchestra experience in 1961, in western New York State. I began clarinet lessons in the fourth grade. In the sixth grade my school music teacher and band director announced in our elementary band rehearsal that some of the wind players would be joining the orchestra for a few rehearsals, and performing with them for part of the upcoming concert. When my fellow wind and percussion players and I reported to the orchestra class, on the music stand was a piece entitled



In the Colonial period, singing schools were an early example of accountability in music instruction. The singing master depended upon remuneration from the citizens in each town visited to provide a roof over his head and food to eat (Birge, 1966, p. 12). At the conclusion of a few weeks' work, the singing master was compensated and moved on to the next town. The primary goal of instruction was improved hymn singing in colonial churches and the results were subject to immediate public scrutiny. Although this instruction certainly was not comprehensive in many respects, it did exemplify a process with definite goals and objectives developed by the community. Whether or not the objectives were attained was evaluated, providing an immediate basis for teacher accountability.

The first public school music program in the United States was initiated in Boston in 1838. Through the remainder of the nineteenth century, music education in the schools consisted of singing activities of various kinds, including group recreational singing, glee clubs, and oratorio performances. These initial approaches to singing in the schools evolved into choral programs and general music classes. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, school bands and orchestras became part of the curriculum, along with music appreciation, history, and theory. By the last half of the twentieth century, performing ensembles in American schools were second to none in terms of the sophisticated level of performance achieved. However, we ensemble directors have not done as good a job as our colleagues who teach general music classes, in developing a comprehensive approach to instruction.

As the early years of the twentieth century unfolded, communication and transportation in the United States developed and improved, facilitating the

sharing of ideas and methodologies among music educators. With the creation of the Music Supervisors National Conference in 1907, regular meetings of music educators from around the country began to take place, including discussions of various aspects of music education and its role in the public schools of the United States.

At the conclusion of the Second World War in 1945, the attitude in the United States was one of complacency regarding our technological and educational

implications for the development of the  
concept of comprehensive musicianship in  
U.S. music education.

curriculum in American schools was too flexible, allowing too many electives, and failing to focus students' attention on language arts, mathematics, and science. Among the responses to [redacted] was [redacted], a 1988 study of arts education by the National Endowment for the Arts. Interestingly, an important conclusion came from this report: that music education programs were too narrowly focused on the technical education of students in performance groups, rather than developing children's musical understanding. Conrad (2006) states that these two reports "... sparked discussions of what kind of content should be taught by music educators." He also points out that

- accompaniments.
4. Composing and arranging music within specified guidelines.
  5. Reading and notating music.
  6. Listening to, analyzing, and describing music.
  7. Evaluating music and music performances.
  8. Understanding relationships between music, the other arts, and disciplines outside the arts.
  9. Understanding music in relation to history and culture.

According to the document's Summary Statement (p. 131):

Students work toward competence from the very beginning, preparing in the lower grades for deeper and more rigorous work each succeeding year .... These Standards provide a vision of competence and educational effectiveness, but without creating a mold into which all arts program 12 0 09 Q q 12 12 90 598.56n





(not that teaching and learning are mutually exclusive, of course), the music education experiences that have had a significant impact on me as a person and a musician have connected me to the deeper things in life, and in making that connection, have helped me discover the deeper aspects of my own identity.

Comprehensive music education connects us to the very structure and essence of music by focusing our attention on the bedrock elements that define it. In so doing, it conveys us to the deepest and most satisfying wellsprings of a meaningful life. When the connection between instructional activities and the essence of the music is lost, music education becomes a trivial matter worthy of consignment only to the second or third tier of educational priorities, or worse. No one wants to be part of a third-rate enterprise. When the connection with musical meaning is lost in the pursuit of the superficial we have traveled into dangerous territory.

To implement a comprehensive music program, one must focus on the of the class, the course, and the curriculum. There is a time in a choral rehearsal, for example, when rote learning is effective and appropriate--an obvious example would be in the teaching and learning of a foreign pronunciation. However, as one looks at the totality of the particular rehearsal, the particular semester of choral classes, the total choral program, and the total music curriculum from kindergarten through high school and beyond, there should be a thoughtfully constructed sequence of appropriate musical understandings which, taken as a whole, offers students the opportunity to tap into the power of music by elucidating music's structure and the interrelatedness of its various dimensions.

The problem with the vast majority of music curricula today is that they are

truncated around the middle school level. By high school, the offerings for music students tend to consist largely, though not entirely, of performing ensembles. These courses meet the needs of the musically talented students, but often the school music education experiences for most of the student population ended in the sixth grade. Since the school population comprises the taxpayers, school board members, and elected officials of the next generation, this does not portend well for the future, and it has already had negative consequences for music education programs.

This is not to say that students' personal, out-of-school musical experiences end in the sixth grade. My ninth grader has an iPod that is loaded with music, and which is seemingly attached to her head from the time she arrives home from school until bedtime (aside from a few mandated periods of conversation with her parents). Forty years ago the Tanglewood Symposium focused on the need to incorporate a diversity of music into our programs that included the music that our students experienced as part of their culture.

Do we have an obligation to provide more than ensemble experiences for the students in today's high schools? Should we be educating students with attention to the musical life they will lead beyond high school? Twenty-five years ago an MENC national meeting had as a focus, "Music as Life-long Learning." There has been limited work done since to address the appropriate role, if any, of music in adult learning. Twenty-five years ago, it was clear that the demographics of the U.S. population would experience a dramatic shift. By the turn of the century, as the baby boomers began to move into their senior years in increasing numbers, this shift would create many societal implications. My university has developed a program of courses that we market to residents of senior housing that we

offer on-site, including courses in music and the other arts. Although there are some relatively limited efforts being made to develop music education programming for adults, work needs to be done to assess the needs of adult learners at various stages of life, and to meet those needs with well thought out, comprehensive programs in music education.

How can we, as music educators in the first decade of the twenty-first century, assure that comprehensive music education will continue to meet the needs of learners? How do we connect our students to the essence of music and its basic elements?

First, we must model comprehensive music education in our own teaching. In our teaching, the primary objective should be to increase our students' understanding of the structure of music. Our teaching should illustrate for them the interwoven connections of the musical material we deal with to the structure of music itself, and to the other courses they are taking. Music theory, history, performance ensembles, and applied music all tie together through the basic structure of music. This is not a new idea, but in an era of increasing specialization, it must be recognized and reflected in the instruction we deliver.

Second, the focus of our teaching should be high-quality, diverse repertoire. With the abundance of high-quality music available, representing a huge range of cultures, there is no reason to settle for anything other than excellent musical materials in the work that we do with our students, whether in ensembles, general music, applied study, or any aspect of music education.

Third, we must guard the integrity of our teacher education programs and seek to provide our students with the tools and materials they need to be comprehensive music educators. There are many vexing challenges confronting music education

programs today, including alternative certification programs, expanded general education requirements in schools of education and elsewhere, and expanded requirements imposed by state departments of education.

Fourth, we must continue to evaluate the multi-faceted results of our efforts. Calls for accountability in music education have been a feature of the professional literature for the past fifty years. Evaluation is a double-edged sword. The simplest evaluative instruments are paper-and-pencil tests of cognitively oriented material. We have always been publicly accountable for some aspects of our music programs. Just as the colonial singing master was held accountable for the results achieved, our performing groups have been evaluated on their technique, style, and interpretation. However, we need to continue our efforts to evaluate the affective educQ q 12 12 588 7T /CS0 d3 cs C

Conference in Keokuk, Iowa, it is appropriate to reflect on the importance of comprehensive music education, the role that it has played in U.S. music education efforts, and the potential for its future. As arts educators, each of us is involved in important work. Each of you is a VIP. I

appreciate the opportunity to speak to you for a few minutes today, and to spend time learning from each of you throughout the remainder of this Symposium. And remember, when you come to a fork in the road, take it!

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## **REFERENCES**

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